# SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

# A 700-YEAR-OLD BASEBALL RECORD?

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This past season Jamie Moyer became the oldest pitcher to win a game since Jack Quinn accomplished the feat on Sept. 13, 1932 for the Brooklyn Dodgers. Good for Moyer. He broke an 80 year old record, a very long time in baseball years.

When a week or so later Bryce Harper become the first teenager to steal home plate since 1964 and by doing so breaking a 48 year old record, my mind drifted to chariot racing. Chariot racing is the longest running sport in the history of humankind. They raced around that oval for almost 800 years.

I wonder if there were any records broken in chariot racing after 700 years. Following the same train of thoughts, are there going to be any baseball records that will be broken after 6 or 7 centuries?

A more intriguing question is will the sport of baseball as we know it today survive that long. The earliest mention of baseball is from around 2 centuries ago, while the sport close to today’s format has been around for a little over 100 years. Baseball, compared to chariot racing is still in its early adolescent years.

It is arrogant to assume that baseball will exist in this form forever. Nothing on earth lasts forever. Not me, not you, not baseball, not chariot racing.

When the civilization of the Roman Empire reached its natural end, chariot racing quickly declined and then disappeared. Some historians attribute the demise to the arrival of populations from outside the empire. That is, they blamed the invasion of the barbarians who were not familiar with the sport and hence could not warm up to it. I disagree with that theory. Immigrants to this country had embraced baseball while American ex-pats living abroad are into soccer. Guys are guys and guys love sports.

Abolition of amphitheater games

What caused the abolition of amphitheater games? I side with those historians who claim that the popularity of chariot racing ended due to poverty pervasive in the late antiquity and to the advent of Christianity. Emperor Constantine split the Roman Empire into two, a Western portion and an Eastern Empire with Byzantium as its capitol. In the Western Empire general misery depopulated the cities. The races where held in Circus Maximum like arenas known as hippodromes (not to be confused with Colosseum), located in major urban centers. By the fifth century taxes and forced payments in kind to maintain the military have destroyed the senatorial and equestrian classes that customarily sponsored the races and provided city administration. Note that admission to the races was free. In its hey-days the sport had attracted close to 250,000 spectators in the Circus Maximum, close to a third of Rome’s population. By the late fifth century people stopped coming.

By then a great majority of the population had converted to Christianity. The teaching of the Christian religion espoused a moral and disciplined and above all a pious and ascetic life away from most sources of possible entertainment. Due to the influence of Tertullian, a third century Christian writer and of Augustine and Jerome a few decades later, gladiatorial games were banned in 438 C.E. Other forms of entertainment, including animal hunts and chariot racing gradually followed the same fate.

In the Eastern Empire, chariot racing survived for another century. In 532 C.E. during the Nike revolt, factions supporting two racing teams fought each other in Byzantium. Thirty thousand people died in the riots. Immediately after the Nike revolt the popularity of chariot racing begun to wane.

And with it, antiquity inched a step closer to the medieval Dark Ages. How so? Think about it: life with no sports? That’s Dark Ages. Let’s move to the present time. How will our own civilization progress over the next few centuries? Will the images of a post-apocalyptic world as seen in some recent moves become reality? That world will certainly be fatal to baseball.

Will any records be broken before baseball reaches its natural and inescapable end? Ty Cobb’s lifetime batting average stands at .366. Will anyone ever beat it? Will anyone improve Joe DiMaggio’s hitting streak in 56 consecutive games? Will either of these two records fall one day in a near or in a distant future?

Just imagine the headline:

**A 700 YEAR OLD BEASEBALL RECORD WAS BROKEN LAST NIGHT!**

*In a game played last night in the cloud city of Ardana\* the third baseman for the home team…… and so on and so on…..*

 I would love to read such an article in my morning paper.

\*see Star Trek, episode 75